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Globalization and diversity – from local quality to global inspiration

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Abstract

World-wide, higher education is increasingly characterized by diversity. On the waves of globalization and social equality movements, research groups, teacher and student populations, as well as academic programmes have become more diverse in terms of internal (demographic) composition and diversification of interests and institutional policies. Gender, race-ethnicity, international exchange, but also the augmenting multiplication of scientific (sub) disciplines and the institutional development of higher education are part of this process². While diversity has the potential of enriching the academic community (and possibly in a broader sense, society as a whole) underlying processes are often far from unproblematic. It is therefore inspiring to look at what is going on elsewhere, to compare pitfalls and opportunities and to develop new perspectives for local problems by exchange on the international level. Both transcultural science and processes of internationalization could benefit from an analysis of the assumptions that feed into the diversity debates in different countries, as well as from the different modes of diversity as developed from local contexts and specific situations.

Key words: diversity as process, higher education, globalization, transculturality.

Introduction

The very concept of diversity suggests difference; and difference frequently is the source of contradiction, inequality and exclusion. Therefore, already conceptually diversity challenges the ideal of a cohesive academic community. The ways in which universities - as traditional academic communities – and other institutes for higher education (HE) deal with what we term the quality test provided by the adoption of diversity are interesting and inspirational for social scientists and higher education managers alike. What can we learn from each other, personally, professionally and on the institutional level? Although important research on the issue is being done at the local/national level (Janssen et.al 2008, van Vught 2008, Ortiz and Santos 2009) the global nature of the phenomenon and its role as a major source of social change require that research aims be broadened, and assigned an internationally comparative nature. In this article, we therefore report on our involvement in international debates over higher education and diversity in order to enhance those and to gain new inspiration for local contexts.

¹ This article is based on a presentation by Ida Sabelis during the Conference ‘From Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions to Transcultural Science’, 16-18 September, Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany.

² The concept of diversity is currently used for rather diverse processes, depending on geographical context or disciplinary background. Besides the ‘traditional’ meaning (see below), all of a sudden, diversity is also used to describe interdisciplinarity and diverse academic systems (as in Van Vught 2008).

During an expert seminar, 24 March 2010 at VU University Amsterdam, the possibilities of a comparative research project in three different national contexts were explored: colleagues from the Netherlands, South Africa (SA), and the United States of America (USA) (University of California Los Angeles, UCLA) gathered to exchange views and experiences in order to set up a joint research project. In all three countries institutions of higher education experience the pressure of an increasing influx of citizens from diverse backgrounds. Needless to say, this pressure is different in nature in South Africa's post-apartheid situation compared to multi-ethnic California, or to the Dutch post-immigration context. Furthermore, in all three countries research and research supported policies in this field are increasingly popular, though the scope and development of both are not on the same level, nor inspired by the same discourse/s. Several schemes of insight were developed during and after the 2010 meeting. The most important result was the composition of a preliminary framework further to build upon.

The invitation to present and discuss the preliminary results of the Amsterdam meeting in Lüneburg, Germany during the seminar 'From Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions to Transcultural Science' in September provided an opportunity to share the Amsterdam experience with other European colleagues. In addition, contextualizing the debate in terms of 'transcultural science' provided a different scope again to reflect on the opportunities and the pitfalls involved in the ongoing tension between making our institutions 'a better place for all' (cf. Thomas 1991) and the neoliberal developments of higher education in the European context (cf. Archer 2007). Moreover, discussing diversity in yet another country triggered curiosity about an additional local source of inspiration.

This paper thus entails reflection on the results of both meetings. First, we sketch the background of our involvement, including attention to the process character of the project. Second, we problematize the differences within the debates in terms of international differences and overlap. And finally we present preliminary conclusions, or consideration on the ongoing dialectical process of developing diversity globally while living, perhaps even managing diversity locally, each of us in our own little place in the world.

Analyzing an ambiguous concept

The main conclusions of the Amsterdam seminar were firstly that it is indeed important to view diversity as an asset in higher education, but that internationally comparative research as suggested (and desired) has been rather absent until now. Secondly, that diversity managers in higher education need a better understanding of the complex diversity processes at stake in order adequately and effectively to develop and implement diversity policies. And thirdly that the different national and institutional contexts show fascinating similarities and differences which from a scientific perspective are worth more in-depth study; from different disciplinary perspectives, and preferably also in multi-lateral research teams. The question is what a design for such a research project might look like; and what conditions can be agreed upon to discuss diversity from a frame of reference that is both flexible and yet provides guidance for the broad input to be expected in terms of both national (regional) and disciplinary input.

By implication the concept of diversity is broad and indistinct; it has analytical as well as normative connotations, which is no doubt due to the fact that it has been employed as much by policymakers as by researchers. Furthermore, it is a concept closely linked to identity. Both diversity and identity are often explained by framing them together with specifying adjectives

(cultural–, religious –, ethnic –, racial –), or nouns (gender –, language –, age –)³. It seems that in HE all of these are relevant, though in varying degrees per context, i.e. per country or region. This is a reason why, for analytical purposes, we might do well to adopt a multi-dimensional or intersectional approach (Benschop & Doorewaard 1998, Acker 2006) for analysis.

Also from a normative perspective ‘diversity’ has varying meanings, generally linked to the pervasive consequences of the power play of normality and its negative conception of difference, leading to processes of stereotyping and othering (Pickering 2001). Diversity then becomes, or continues to be, a problem. From a positive connotation, while reframing difference into equality, diversity is directly linked to quality. Consequently, diversity becomes an asset (Brink 2010). Dealing with diversity from a normative perspective then might benefit from the same multi-dimensional approach the other perspectives require (see Figure 1). We gain inspiration here from the comprehensive overview of paradigms as presented, among others, by Thomas and Ely (1996). A more recent, critical review of diversity in the context of national policy discourse is offered by Louise Archer (2008). In her discussion of the discourse of “widening participation” in HE in the UK, Archer criticises the different goal – settings of diversity in the paradoxical context of neoliberalism and the development, like in wider Europe, of a more uniform academic setting: (new) universities becoming competitive players, also internationally, to secure further existence (their survival?) by making their own money. Especially in Europe universities traditionally were funded by the government. Currently, there is a tendency to decrease funding while at the same time more students are encouraged to enter HE. Archer’s critique illustrates the paradigm debate over diversity in this context. The debate ranges from pleas for social justice (the fairness, or equity paradigm), via the striving for access of specific groups (i.e. implying control under the promotion of access for formerly-excluded groups and other forms of legitimacy) all the way to abandoning dichotomous thinking in terms of inclusion (diversity at work as a holistic device). While it seems already difficult to agree upon the paradigms that are at stake in the different debates, the expansion of HE in terms of its economic survival seems largely counterproductive to ‘diversity as an asset’. For instance, while internationalization helps to expand the pool from which to attract a very diverse student population, economic expansion is always aiming at efficiency, while saving of time and money implies uniformity of demands. Thus, neoliberalization runs counter to the option of creating safe spaces and taking time for diversity (Ghorashi 2010) as a process that is inevitable in our global context.

Diversity perspectives

The fact that the diversity concept involves both analytical and normative connotations should, however, not create a divide between those interested in science or reflection, and those who struggle with policy design and implementation. To the benefit of both, and bridging the divide between the two lines of thought, we envision expansion of international cooperation in research which is broad by implication, detailed in its elaboration and for the time being: engaging in process more than in facts and figures. Diversity cannot be termed a new asset, but by implication diversity is a theme that suggests ongoing adaptation, flexible action, and dealing with the unexpected all the time. Others entering the organisation confront the *status quo*. Demands for change of improvisation always emerge unexpectedly. Consecutively, this leads to various sub

³ For one of the roots of dealing with multiple differences both conceptually as well as analytically, see also Lida van den Broek (1988) *Am Ende der Weißheit*. Berlin: Orlanda Verlag. Further theorized into the concept of ‘intersectionality’ by among others Crenshaw 1991, Benschop & Doorewaard 1998, Acker 2006

questions and to subprojects, especially to feed local experiences into the bigger scheme. Figure 1 serves to summarize this line of reasoning.

Fig. 1: **Three complementing perspectives on diversity**

I	The diversity of diversity: the analysis of the concept in an international HE context	Scientific interest: theoretical underpinning of the HE research, embedded in conceptual debates and historical analysis: mapping the terrain
II	Diversity as quality, the quality of diversity: towards a process approach in HE	HE policy and management interest: reframing / mapping the problem focus into an asset
III	Diversity in the political arena: the politics and policies of diversity	Societal interest: exploring the civil (social) benefits (social capital) of a diversified HE sector and beyond: from HE-centred to wider circles of interest.

It is the huge variance in the conceptualization of the diversity concept in HE contexts (themselves having very different features) that makes for the relevance of this perspective. As mentioned, not only diversity as an identity issue is meant here, but increasingly also the disciplinary and paradigm based dimensions. Consider for example the vast differences in the organization of secondary education between the USA and SA on the one hand, and Europe on the other. Despite the Bologna Convention⁴ that served to introduce a more comparable and general (coherent) system of HE in Europe, the respective countries still largely cherish their own systems⁵. And, obviously, within the academic community competition has evolved past the disciplinary borders. Hence diversity is being applied to the various academic fields as well, materializing among other things in fierce debates over epistemologies and methodologies to the extent that we sometimes have difficulty to understand each others' professional habits⁶.

The distinct access of students in HE in the respective nations constitutes another angle from which to analyze the problem. This perspective enables tracing the discourses of and around diversity. Moreover, it challenges us to become each others' 'mirrors': by discussing what seem to be local problems we can both detect similarities in the process and help each other to detect 'blind spots' that we wouldn't have become aware of expect via comparison. Nothing is as strong

⁴ The Bologna Process is named after the place where the treaty was agreed: the University of Bologna in the Italian city of Bologna. In 1999 the Bologna Declaration was signed by Ministers of Education from 29 European countries. It serves the longstanding purpose of harmonizing HE in Europe, adapting HE to a more global system – also with the aim of providing better opportunities for international exchange for students of the (mainly Western) world.

⁵ Our experience with the Dutch and the German systems at least show that institutions have largely moulded the traditional programmes into the new format. And for good reasons: redesigning programs takes a lot of time and effort; both were not abundantly provided during the change processes. Furthermore, academic institutions are big and slow, whereas the 'change' usually came 'over night' as a managerial asset. And finally, reliance on the (known and proven) quality of the old programmes was only 'natural' considering the ambiguity of the change process.

⁶ Not unexpectedly, there is another paradox here: while interdisciplinarity (and even *transdisciplinarity*) is being promoted from the assumption that we should cross borders and combine forces in order to overcome differences and better to understand each other in a globalizing world, market-driven competition on the institutional level seems to evolve more around the 'traditional' divides, e.g. the natural sciences vs. the social sciences. Yet, this is another theme and shall be discussed elsewhere.

as wonder over the others' habits when it comes to discovering new ways of dealing with old problems.

From the second perspective, we look at HE as a dynamic field where knowledge aimed at problem-solving in the broadest sense is being produced in the academic arena. Institutions are challenged to include contesting views, and to turn inequalities into quality issues. Studying, or rather mapping how institutions manage to cater these transformative opportunities is a fascinating research topic that may activate institutional management as well as academics to demonstrate the added value for the sector, and the community at large. The demand for higher education and qualified professionals is different in all countries, but e.g. the challenge to reconcile academic standards and flexibility on access, is a pressing issue that requires solid research input. Of course, a certain type of class related issues are linked to academic reputation. This brings along that competition between countries can be fierce. On the other hand, if we regard diversity as a process of opportunities, short term competition could be transformed into mutually complementing or matching asset. Although we are aware of the fact that especially on the structural levels it is often hard to abandon the 'old ways'⁷, serious engagement with diversity inevitably requires a flexible way to look at the ways 'we are used to do things around here'. A market strategy aiming at individual gain by universities might, from a diversity perspective, be turned into a complementary strategy through which in due time all institutions benefit instead of competing each other to the brink of extinction.

Finally, diversity in HE is not an isolated phenomenon, nor can it be studied in isolation. Institutions from this sector are part of a civil society that is differently phased and shaped in the US, SA, the Netherlands, and Germany – and the UK and Australia, according to Louise Archer (2008). As education is generally believed to be one of the prime contributors to social transformation, studying the vicissitudes of the concept as policy, practice, and process has added value for the respective societies. One of the questions that can be raised in this context is if diverse universities e.g. generate social capital within and beyond their boundaries, and what kind of impact this might have on their environments? After all, diversity (development) is not just an asset for HE; it is important in different ways in the respective countries – depending on the country's history in coping with differences, and the diverse diversity dimensions that prevail. For instance, in some countries racism (and a history of race related issues) is more prominent than gender. Along these lines, the history of diversity in USA from the nineteen fifties on was intertwined with issues of race. In the Netherlands, and to some extent in Germany, the liberation movements of the 1960s were more inspired by issues of class and power. In sum, both the history of diversity and the diverse foregrounding aspects in the different national and institutional contexts feed into the debates and probably determine into which societal areas strategies have more chance of success.

From whatever angle we look at diversity, it will always require a view that is dynamic and focused on process (Maré 2010). Such a perspective naturally flows from Beall's argument (1997) that a distinction between 'difference' and 'diversity' is insightful, because how we conceptualize distinctions between people affects the way in which we understand them and treat them. In Beall's case through development projects; in our case via the relationship between staff and students between and among each other; the multiple formal and informal interactions that are involved in that relationship, and the responsibilities that are implied in those relationships – in other words: 'diversity' within tertiary education institutions. As nouns these two words are

⁷ Implying the neoliberal idea of market-like competition in academic life, see e.g. Parker & Jarvis 1996, Archer 2007, Nelson 2010

similar; as verbs they are not. And it is this distinction, as illustrated by the acts of ‘differentiating’ and of ‘diversifying’, that Beall then employs in her own writing. The former is usually a top-down process, utilising categories that seem obvious, and that are largely perceived as unchanging and homogeneous. In Beall’s words this implies ‘categorisation, prioritisation and potential hierarchies; at worst it can imply discrimination or even social engineering’ (1997:9). The latter, diversifying, refers to processes of change, rather than ‘*identities*’; ‘... in the shift from analysis to action. It is arguably important that planning, management, partnerships and activism interact creatively with *diversity*, which is a more dynamic and flexible concept than the static one of *difference*’ (ibid.).

Research: mutually supporting projects

The extensive and comparative venture of an international discussion about diversity in order locally to be inspired (and to obtain strategies for action) requires an encompassing research theme that needs further to be developed into sub questions, leading toward a rich research design. In the discussions we had during the Amsterdam seminar several options have been suggested. These serve as ‘working questions’ and obviously need refinement, but they are helpful to start expressing the ‘engaged scholarship’.

Levels of investigation

A dynamic perspective on diversity in HE is strengthened by adopting a layered design that distinguishes the various levels in which research should be done. Within the social construction of reality paradigm (often attributed to Berger & Luckmann 1967) man is presented as in constant interaction with his/her structural environment. Others have made extra distinctions in both the actor and the structural domain. Layder (1993) proposes the individual (the self), interpersonal (situated activity), institutional (setting), and contextual level for social research. In her study on diversity Walker (2005) applies the research map to show the pervasive presence of race in all levels of South African society (2005:42). This research map may be a useful tool for our programme, as researchers may want to lend themselves to exploration at one or more of the four levels described (Figure 2). Moreover, in a multi-researcher programme like we envisage researchers could well use material gathered by others at the same or other levels, but in different places, or with the application of different levels of abstraction.

Fig. 2. Levels of research on Diversity in Higher Education

Level	Research	Sources
Context: macro-social formation – the state, society	State policy towards ‘diversity’ in general and in HE institutions specifically. Social organization of education.	Legislation and policy documents; parliamentary debates; speeches
Setting: immediate social organisation of single universities	Description and history of the specific institution, with primary focus on issues of diversity; policy and policy-making and execution (eg orientation, language policy, accommodation policies; cases of conflict and ways of resolution;	Observation meetings; shadowing leaders; focus groups; formal interviews; discourse analysis. Critical incidents approach
Situated activity: activity and meaning making (everyday life of institutional inhabitants)	Student counselling services; religious practices and accommodation; campus life; teaching environment; home environment	Observation meetings and informal activities; shadowing; focus groups; semi-structured interviews
Self: “unique psychobiography” of each individual	Quantitative and qualitative: who are the staff and students; how do they experience the institution in relation to issues of diversity; what do they understand diversity to mean, and what could it mean; how would they go about achieving the goals; etc	Management information; questionnaires; interviews; participant observation and diaries; life histories

Elaborating the different levels in order to grasp possible themes and topics, we can connect different types of research project to the sources, of fields of investigation. Obviously, these are open for adding subthemes and topics according to researchers’ interest, capacity and expertise.

First of all, and most inspiring, there is the assessment that diversity issues differ across countries. But *how* is this so? What differences are inspirational, or invite reflection? What are the main diversity issues in SA, Dutch, US higher education policies and practices, and how can these fruitfully be compared? A second layer is that of the setting: the institution/s involved. As mentioned before, the diverse settings may differ tremendously in terms of institutional traits and traditions. For instance, the relative isolation of South Africa’s higher education during *apartheid* accounts for a currently different institutional development in mergers and cooperation between HE institutions than the already sketched development of European universities following the Bologna agreement. The urge and the pace with which mergers have been managed, the extent to which cooperation between institutions has been forced upon them, or not, may have a profound influence on the plays of power and politics within the institutes – and thus also on the ways in which types of diversity are surfacing today. Obviously, this has impact on the third level, the everyday interaction, between staff, staff and students and among student groups from different background, or identity marker/s. In an ethnographic report on campus life in Texas, USA,

(Duivenvoorde, 2007) the institutional conditions of the university under study all met the formal demands for a diversity climate as we would wish for. Everyday life however, showed distinct traits of Texas' history with ethnic difference, a profound gender bias in the *curriculae*, and a gap between what students said they took for granted and how they for instance formed groups of friends. And finally, there is the level of individual identities, histories and daily interaction. Obviously, this level is sometimes hard to distinguish from the third. After all, diversity and identity are being acted out, and meaning attributed in interaction, discussion, and discourse.

Options for a programme structure

An internationally comparative approach to the diversity issue in HE exceeds the possibilities of a single researcher. It would ideally consist of a group of principal researchers, one from each country, completed with a group of senior researchers, post-docs, and PhD students (full/part-time). Or, we might benefit from the course of action that triggered this paper in the first place: a network of participants, each building upon the experiences from former meetings or publications, and adding to the whole by referring to the former meetings from new discussions and debates. In order to build the integrated research programme of Dutch, German (European), North American and South African partners, it seems only pragmatic to further develop funding proposal/s aimed at the national research councils and foundations of the respective countries, as well as the European Community and other sponsoring agencies. Such a programme would, next to a thorough and overarching research design and elaborated sub projects, include separate sections on leadership and coordination, administration, communication and dissemination, archiving of data, ethical clearance, etc.

During the Lüneburg seminar, we ended on a positive note for this venture, while agreeing upon the importance of the addressed levels. We decided that is it both very inspiring and fruitful to look at the differences between (our) countries. Mirroring and probing daily experiences in our institutions on diversity issues, and taking time not to jump to conclusion that easily, leads to exchange of ideas and to mirroring diverse solutions in their national and institutional contexts. For instance, the pros and cons of the development into the bachelor / master system, and comparing our expectations and fears, leads to discussion on the international level. How do we differ and how are we alike in the problems and options we face and experience? Have we learned from each other, or are we re-inventing the wheel? What are the pitfalls and options of all these institutions on their way to become international HE institutes? What implications can we see from this development for internal (e.g. gender, class, age-related) developments and external demands (e.g. language skills, loss of ethnic detail, gain of a broader view)? And what is needed on an everyday basis to obtain space and time to 'step aside and create a safe space' for reflection about the diversity process? What types of intersectionality, the crossing and combination of diversity aspects, are visible, to be expected, under the surface in our different settings? As always, time ran out before we could intensively go into these issues. However, scheduling and coherently summarising what is at stake, and what we may expect from the international exchange, i.e. defining preliminary common ground to start working from, is already an achievement.

Considerations

From whatever angle we look at diversity in Higher Education, it all seems so logical, so rational. So, why does it not 'happen'? There is one thing in the contemporary processes that is striking, especially through the experience of discussing issues of diversity on a global level. Apart from diversity being a contemporary challenge / problem, the very nature of diversity demands the

creation of time and space for communication, negotiation and redefinition of what is at stake. And this has to happen over and over again, as there is always the risk that we lean back, longing for quiet reliance on what we already knew. However, the consequence of adopting a diversity perspective is that, in an ever changing context, we have to practice what we preach. The very process of working towards a diverse workforce, dealing with diverse student populations and coping in a context of ever-different institutional demands is both the means as well as the end of the operation. The 'global' limits what we could obtain in terms of inspiration from elsewhere (rendering Marsians a matter to deal with as soon as they appear). The local remains the sometimes muddy practice we are dealing with on a daily basis. The two belong together however. The use of the term *transcultural* science as taken from the discussion in Germany, suggests a step further from the notion of implementation of diversity policies and its concomitant processes of change on all levels. Adopting the transcultural dimension as a goal implies a genuine desire to transcend the suggested expansion in internationalization and reach further into a future in which difference is more of a uniting quality.

Finding ourselves in the luxurious circumstance that we can escape time and space by also virtually discussing, exchanging and sharing experiences, there is no real reason why we should not grasp the opportunities. The transcultural debates on the issue of diversity are only starting. This is why we cannot do more than sketch the developing frames of understanding that should enhance and feed the debates to come. Or, on a positive note, we can finish this piece by saying: to be continued.

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Ida Sabelis, Frans Kamsteeg and Harry Wels are long-time colleagues from the department of Culture, Organization and Management (since 01-01-2011 'Organization Sciences') at the Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University in Amsterdam. Each having their specific field of interest within the study of organizational culture, they decided to join forces for the project 'Diversity and Higher Education'. Together with other colleagues (Halleh Ghorashi and Sierk Ybema) they organized the Amsterdam workshop on Diversity and HE in March 2010 in Amsterdam. *Ida Sabelis* then managed the connection to Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany through her background as guest professor there during the summer semester 2008. *Ida's* fields of interest are gender, time and organisation expressed in the theme of sustainability; and issues of continuity and disruption related to diversity.

Frans Kamsteeg does research on the impact of the HE merger process that started in South Africa in 2000. One of major political goals for the government in initiating this process was to accomplish transformation of the HE system in term of access, equity and redress of the apartheid legacy. Ethnic and gender diversity are among the main issues at stake when South African HE institutions merge.

Harry Wels' particular interest in the concept of diversity is related to his organizational ethnographic research in the regional context of South and southern Africa. Diversity issues are highly articulated in South Africa, mainly as a result of its embeddedness in a history of apartheid and South Africa's conscious attempts and policies towards social and cultural transformation since Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected African president of the country in 1994.

